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Lohia and Language [with Rejoinder]
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Lohia and Language

SUDHANVA DESHPANDE

Was Rammanohar Lohia a Hindi chauvinist after all? Sudhanva Deshpande's response to Yogendra Yadav goes in search of Lohia's writings on language and finds them supporting Hindi parochialism.
Yogendra Yadav responds that opposition to English was the core of Lohia's stand on language and he asked questions which may still be relevant.

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In his response to my interjection on bilingualism, Yogendra Yadav ("Was Lohia Parochial and Monolingual?" EPW, 24 October 2009) argues that Rammanohar Lohia's position was anti-English, but not against other Indian languages. I parrot, he says, "a misrepresentation of Lohia's thinking on the language question very common among the left intellectual circles", who are to blame for the impression that Lohia was a "Hindi supremacist and a linguistic chauvinist who did not understand the complexities of nation-building in a multilinguistic country".

I am afraid the shoe is on the other foot. It is Yadav who misrepresents Lohia's position on the language question by selective quotations that *leave out the very core of his position.*

Yadav does not tell us who these "left intellectuals" are who have levelled charges against Lohia. Even so, I assume these charges would hold if it could be demonstrated (a) that Lohia's advocacy of Hindi was not limited to certain linguistic regions but was eventually meant to cover all of India; (b) that Lohia thought of non-Hindi languages in a patronising, superior way; (c) that he denied independent language status to languages that exist in non-coastal north India; and (d) that even when Lohia granted the freedom to some region to continue using its own language, he did this with regret and considered it a mistake.

Lohia makes a distinction between the "coastal lands" and the "mid-lands" in his 1962 article "Feudal Languages versus People's Languages": "The coastal areas of the country speak languages other than Hindi. The mid-lands speak Hindi...and Assamiya (sic) is another language of the non-coastal north-east" (p 70).[1] Further, in "Coastal Areas and the Heartland" (1964), he says

> Let me make it clear that the problem is not between the north and south, but between the coastal regions and the heartland (p 66).

What does Lohia propose as the "correct" policy that can resolve the "problem"? Yadav quotes the title of Lohia's 1958 essay, "Removal of English, Not the Establishment of Hindi", but omits to quote its text. Here it is:

> Hindi should be the language of the central government. Immediately after, the gazetted posts of the central government should be reserved for non-Hindi speaking areas for ten years. The centre should correspond with states in Hindi and the states should correspond with the centre in their regional languages until such time they learn Hindi. The medium of education up to graduate course should be the regional language and for postgraduate course it should be Hindi. The district judge and magistrate may use their regional languages whereas the high court and Supreme Court should use Hindustani. The speeches in Lok Sabha should be generally made in Hindustani but members who do not know Hindi may speak in their own language. Although it is a correct language policy, any state or government which may not like to adopt this policy and wishes to continue with its regional language should have the freedom to do so. It should not be objected to although it will be a regrettable situation. I believe this is a temporary difficulty. Therefore, keeping in view the pernicious propaganda and interests of the nation, the chief aim of our movement should be removal of English and not the establishment of Hindi. It is certain that Hindi shall be established on all India level in due course. But if in some states or even on the all India level, Marathi or Bengali is established, we should not mind it (pp 6-7).

Four points need emphasis. One, that Lohia allows state governments the freedom to correspond in their own languages *until such time as they learn Hindi.*

Two, in return for this, non-Hindi states are to be bribed with reservations: "The mid-lands must immediately operate through the Hindi department in Delhi. If Gujarat and Maharashtra and any other states opt to join the Hindustani department, they should be gratefully welcomed with whatever reservations in the services and the like they desire" ("Feudal Languages", p 73).

Three, if any state continues with its regional language, this will be a *regrettable situation:* "I have [gone] so far as to accept Tamil as a central language, however unwillingly, should the people of Tamil Nadu (sic) in their error insist

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upon it" ("The Madras Happenings", 1960, p 53).

Four, propagation of Hindi must be temporarily suspended, but this is only a tactical retreat to achieve strategic victory:

> The effort to persuade the coast-lands to accept Hindi must be given up, for it only leads to further irritation and embitterment. Once these coast-lands have abandoned English at the provincial level, including the high court, the university, the secretariat and all such public institutions, it would be only a matter of time when they apply for admission into the Hindi department in Delhi ("Feudal Languages", pp 73-74).

This is repeated in "Coastal Areas" (p 66).

Call me "narrow-minded", but it does seem to me that Lohia is asking his opponents to bat with six stumps on a wet pitch with the boundary pushed back 50 yards!

After assuring us that Lohia "went out of his way to address the sensibilities of non-Hindi speakers", Yadav admits, three sentences later, that "One could argue that (Lohia's proposals) did not meet the sensibilities of the non-Hindi speakers. Indeed, Lohia's politics of language demands a serious review of the kind his followers have never attempted." However, "to see [Lohia's stand] as simple-minded parochialism is to misunderstand what needs to be criticised in the first place".

Instead of telling us what this "serious review" might consist of, Yadav jumps to listing Kannada writers who admire Lohia. (The one name he misses, by the way, is that of K V Subanna, the founder of Ninasam, the institution I greatly admire and wrote about in my response to Ram Guha.) Yadav finds it "hard to imagine" that Subanna or Ananthamurthy can admire a thinker without endorsing the totality of his programme. Frankly, this assumption patronises these fine minds. Since Lohia had demanded that India acquire nuclear weapons, and since the Pokhran tests took place under a Lohiaite defence minister, do present-day admirers of Lohia like Yadav endorse India's nuclear weapons programme?

Lohia advocated a "sisterly relationship" between the languages of India. But lest we understand this to mean that they must coexist as equals, he was quick to clarify:

> If younger sisters are sometimes uppish (sic), as happens always, it does not matter. Tamil, Telugu and Gurmukhi, etc, are the younger sisters, and many of them are very beautiful. It is often said that Hindi is the language of the uneducated, and Bengali is a sweet tongue, or that Tamil is a literary one. When such things are said I ask the Hindi people not to go (sic) into arguments. After all, younger sisters are naturally more beautiful. The elder sister cannot be so glamorous, she will be a little plump ("English and the People's Languages in India", 1959: 39).

Even if we ignore the sexism of Lohia's analogy, "older" and "younger" here are hierarchical concepts, not factual.

Yadav makes much of the fact that Lohia was not enamoured of the kind of highly Sanskritised Hindi favoured by the Sangh parivar. Which is why it comes as a shock when Lohia says: "I am also frightened of the recent move to introduce into Hindi or Hindustani a larger influx of words of Arabic origin" ("Coastal Areas", p 65). "This may well be with a view to make Hindustani more dissimilar from Bengali or Marathi or Telugu" which would stand in the way of "tempt[ing] the other coastal states into wanting to join the Hindustani department" (p 66).

And what about Urdu? From a 1958 resolution of the Socialist Party: "Urdu language should be made more easy so that a common man can understand it. Use of difficult words from Arabic (sic) and Farsi should be given up in this language" ("Urdu", p 84). Is this a plea for democratisation of Urdu, or an effort to gradually obliterate, in practice, the specificity of Urdu? The truly socialist position surely would be that the people be given real access to the best education, so they can participate in the most complex discourse in their own language. Note that they are not asking Urdu writers to write simply, their demand is for the language itself to be simplified!

Let us return to the idea of the Hindi-speaking "mid-lands" and the non-Hindi speaking "coastal lands". The most obvious case that defies this thesis is Punjabi – spoken in the heart of the "mid-land" by a very significant number of people. Lohia's response is simple: he denies that Punjabi is an independent language at all:

> I consider the Punjabi language as a style of Hindustani language. The language of the first Guru Nanak, and the last Guru, Teg Bahadur, was nearer the Avadhi and Braj styles of Hindi than the current Punjabi style...We must now consider this question unburdened by past prejudices and correct the mistake of our Constitution makers. Punjabi should be removed from the schedule of languages mentioned in the Constitution ("To Akalis and Punjabi Suba", 1961: 63).

In the same year, the Socialist Party urged Master Tara Singh and the Akali Dal to "involve their own interests with the larger national interests and consider the language issue from a large point of view is adopted (sic). Punjabi is not different from the national language Hindi and is like Rajasthani, Magadhi, Avadhi, Brija, Bhojpuri, etc" (p 112).

Ignore that Lohia got the name of the last Sikh guru wrong. Ignore also that in privileging *khadi boli* Hindi, this view is perilously close to the same official discourse around Hindi that it claims to challenge. But do note his complete disregard of the role that the Bhakti and Sufi movements played in the development of Indian languages.

Contrast this with the understanding put forward by Marxists, in particular E M S Namboodiripad (especially in *The National Question in Kerala*), whose centenary too falls this year. EMS saw the Bhakti movement as marking the formation of linguistic nationalities. Unlike in Europe, this was not the result of the emergence of a manufacturing bourgeoisie to a position of ascendancy, but rather of a mercantile and usurious bourgeoisie that had developed under the precapitalist system. Therefore, the Marxist support for linguistic states was not motivated by identity politics, nor was it opportunistic. It came out of the understanding that linguistic states were a vital part of the bourgeois revolution that the bourgeoisie itself was too scared to carry through to its logical end. (Let me also say that I am fully aware that EMS' is not the only Marxist position on this question, and that there has been a vibrant debate on this question among Marxists.)

One final postscript: Yadav advised me to read Lohia's book, and thereby hangs a tale quite worth telling.

I checked with several book distributors on Ansari Road, the heart of Delhi's book business. All returned a blank. The Delhi Public Library, one of the four repository libraries in India, has Lohia's Hindi *Rachnavali*, but not this book. I went online. The site *Dr Lohia Centenary*

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(www.drlohiacentenary.org) has a list of "Dr Lohia's Works", but no electronic copies and no link to sellers. The Jawaharlal Nehru University library does not have the book. Neither do 13 central libraries of the University of Delhi, including the Ratan Tata Library of the Delhi School of Economics, the Central Reference Library and the Arts Library. I went to the house of Janeshwar Mishra, the senior socialist Member of Parliament, where Lohia's literature is sold. No copy of *Language*. Could they procure it for me? No. Lohia's little book was rapidly turning into a Pentagon memo – everyone knows it exists, no one knows where.

This should cause admirers of Lohia some concern. That the political inheritors of Lohia care two hoots for his books is scarcely surprising. Gandhi's writings have suffered a similar fate. But there exists a band of dedicated, selfless scholar-activists who, away from the glare of the media, have made it their life's mission to keep Gandhi's ideas in circulation. The left intellectuals that Yadav castigates expend more than a little time, effort, energy and passion on making available the ideas that they uphold, by running cultural groups, bringing out theoretical and literary journals, or keeping afloat publishing houses. It seems a bit rich, then, that Yadav regrets the "narrow-mindedness" of the left that "shrinks the intellectual resources available to radical cultural politics". Hardly! Cultural resources shrink when those who lecture leftists do not put their money where their mouth is.

NOTE

1 All cited essays are from Lohia's *Language* (1986).

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A Rejoinder

YOGENDRA YADAV

I should thank Sudhanva Deshpande for a serious and substantive response to my criticism. Even though I have not convinced him, it is gratifying to note that he has chosen not to press his rather colourful description of Lohia in his original article ("Bilinguism, Theater and the Fate of the Vernacular", EPW, 5 September 2009), which had prompted my response. Just to recall, he had objected to Lohia being described as a "bilingual intellectual", compared Lohia on language to Jinnah on religion – "cosmopolitan in personal life, parochial in public" – and had called his movement "trenchantly monolingual". Deshpande's energetic response has shifted the question ever so slightly. Instead of asking whether Lohia was monolingual, now we are debating whether Lohia's brand of multilingualism was fair to non-Hindi languages and worth accepting. This is a different but fair and significant question.

Clarifications

Before I turn to his central and serious point, let me quickly move some of the side issues out of the way. One, why do I castigate "left intellectuals", and not just Sudhanva Deshpande, for ignoring and misrepresenting Lohia? Because I have heard comments of the kind Deshpande made from all kinds of left academics, including many of my teachers, who mistake me for a Lohiaite, for well over two decades. While much of this scorn is expressed orally, here is a sample of some recent written expressions from sources Deshpande might approve: an EPW editorial mocked "Lohia's simplistic logic of Hindi against English" (1990: 1678). Aijaz Ahmed summarised Lohia's programme as "extreme linguistic-cultural chauvinism" (2000: 344-45), Prabhat Patnaik regretted that Lohia's movement had "a lot of this Hind[i]-Hindu business" (2002) and the Hindi writer Mudra Rakshas wrote in *Pahal*, accusing Lohia of fascist leanings.

Two, do I patronise non-Hindi intellectuals, like Ananthamurthy, who admire Lohia by assuming that they accepted the totality of Lohia's views, including his language policy? Highly unlikely, for a large number of writers in Indian languages, other than Hindi, were attracted to Lohia not *despite*, but *because* of his stance on language. Indeed it would be odd if a creative writer were to take inspiration from someone whose language policy she rejects. Here, for example, is Ananthamurthy in his own words: "What I find most remarkable in Lohia is that he stood by the Indian languages" (2002).

Three, why do we not get Lohia's books in the bookshops and libraries in Delhi? Frankly, this point amazes me, coming as it does from an activist of a popular movement. Almost all of Lohia's writings have been published and republished, in Hindi and in English from the 1960s onwards by the Hyderabad-based Rammanohar Lohia Samata Vidyalaya Nyas. There are more than a dozen doctoral dissertations and books on Lohia's thought. Last year a nine-volume Hindi anthology of nearly all of Lohia's works was published (Kapoor 2008) and the English version is in press. Volume eight of this anthology has the entire book *Language*. Why these books do not find place in many libraries is, no doubt, a small comment on the Lohiaites but it may also be a bigger comment on Indian academia. There may be a hidden story here about the placement of the Left in the Indian intellectual establishment. I sincerely hope that half a century hence, no one would pour scorn on Jana Natya Manch's excellent work just because its performances were not available in the digital libraries of that time.

Lohia and Language

Let me turn to the substantive point about Lohia's privileging of Hindi in ways that appear condescending to other Indian languages. Deshpande has a point there and his quotations from Lohia may be selective, but not unfair or torn out of context. The only point where Deshpande may have been unfair is about Urdu. Lohia's Hindustani was an amalgamation of non-Sankritised Hindi and non-Persianised Urdu and it is not clear to me what is so odd about it. Generally, it is fair to say that forging and bolstering Hindustani by curing it of Sanskritic *and* Arabic-Persian excesses and by subsuming some of the neighbouring languages like Punjabi and

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Gujarati was indeed Lohia's preferred path for countering the dominance of English. In fact, (to strengthen Deshpande's case) I should also mention that Lohia believed that different Indian languages need not have different alphabets, that all of these could be written in the *nagari* script. This is not a solution that appeals to our sensibilities today and for good reasons. Yet this recognition does not lead to the kind of conclusions that Deshpande rushes to.

It is simply untrue to say that Lohia's views on the relationship between Hindi and other Indian languages are *"the very core of his position"* (Deshpande, emphasis in original). Even a cursory reading of any of Lohia's numerous writings and speeches on the language question shows it beyond doubt that the core of Lohia's position is banishment of English at any cost. For Lohia this was like Gandhi's admonition to the British: you leave first, we shall settle our affairs any which way. What arrangement should replace English and which of the Indian languages should occupy what place exactly is something Lohia reflected upon all the time, but it was a second order question for Lohia. In his mind it comes, logically and sequentially, after reaching an agreement on the banishment of English. While he was uncompromising on his opposition to English, Lohia was always more tentative and open to correction about the relationship among Indian languages.

Precisely because it was a second order question, there was ambivalence and subtle shifts in Lohia's thinking on this question. Deshpande has very meticulously, if selectively, documented one side to this ambivalence where Lohia places emphasis on Hindi at the cost of other Indian langauges. If my note had put more emphasis on the other side of this ambivalence, where Lohia repeatedly defends the rights and capabilities of Indian languages against English and Hindi chauvinism, it was not to hide Lohia's preference for Hindi, which I had clearly mentioned, but to distinguish his politics of language from an obviously Hindi supremacist politics advocated by the Jan Sangh. Lohia began with the position that Hindustani should be the language of the union but moved to a two-department thesis involving a bifurcation of Hindi and non-Hindi sections in the government, and finally came to advocate a multi-lingual centre involving all the (then) 14 official languages. "Hindi Jaye Jahannum Me" (Let Hindi go to hell) was Lohia's oft repeated maxim on this question (Sahay 2003).

Finally, Deshpande's use of current sensibilities about languages and dialects to judge what was said in the 1950s involves an element of anachronism. Today we consider speakers of Haryanvi and Pahari as falling in the Hindi region, sharply distinct from Punjabi, but these boundaries may not have looked the same 50 years ago and may not be so 50 years from now. The Left Front government in West Bengal flatly rejects the claims of Kamtapuri language, but the picture could look very different a few decades from now. This is not to say that I support Lohia's suggestions in this regard: any move to subsume Punjabi or Gujarati into Hindi today would definitely be a regressive move. If anything, now we need to pay more attention to the linguistic specificities of the so-called dialects of Hindi. At the same time, a self-assured projection of our current preferences into the past goes against the very point of studying history.

Radical Language Politics

Despite these limitations, Deshpande's intervention is a valuable reminder that radical politics cannot simply implement Lohia's language policy without facing a serious dilemma about the relationship between different Indian languages. Shorn of its avoidable polemics, it invites us to think about why a cosmopolitan, pluralist and egalitarian thinker like Lohia, ever sensitive to the dignity of the oppressed minorities, privileges the language of the majority over those of linguistic minorities. Once we pose the question in this frame, we come face to face with Lohia's deep dilemma: how to counter the dominance of English, one of the principle carriers of inequality and derivative thinking in contemporary India, without creating an alternative lingua franca? It also opens a way to thinking past this dilemma. Perhaps, Lohia was wrong in assuming the need for a powerful link language. Perhaps the right direction is to look for a multi-lingual solution. Perhaps, we are past the stage when English could be banished altogether. Perhaps, an Indianised English can be an ally of the Indian languages in their struggle against English. Debating these issues is vital to the future of radical, egalitarian, politics. But we can do so only when we get over the temptation to play a my-EMS-was-better-than-your-Lohia (or its reverse) type of game that best belongs to *akharas* and sects.

The real value of Lohia's politics of language is not that it offers us easy and clear answers but that it dares to ask a big and vital question in a post-colonial society. The danger is that in quibbling with his answers we can conveniently sidestep his question. This is symptomatic of the larger tragedy of our memory of Lohia: a small and dwindling cult of Lohiaites mistakes Lohia's questions for answers just when a vast and growing mainstream is turning its back to the questions that he raised.

In this context I should again thank Sudhanva Deshpande for providing an occasion for a serious exchange on Lohia in the pages of EPW after nearly four decades. Now that I have convinced him that one needs to read Lohia before criticising him, I do hope that he would consider the next step and read Lohia with an open mind.

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